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TAGS: PREL PGOV PINR SL

SUBJECT: FOREIGN MINISTER UNHAPPY, AND PERHAPS UNLOVED

REF: 08 FREETOWN 561

Classified By: Ambassador June Carter Perry for Reason 1.4 (B)

¶1. (C) The Ambassador met Sierra Leonean Foreign Minister Zainab Bangura on February 16 to provided a tour d'horizon of the new U.S. Administration's priorities and the Secretary's stated interest in assistance programs. The Minister had just returned to Sierra Leone on February 13 following a prolonged trip outside the country, and had requested the meeting with the Ambassador; the Minister also simultaneously canceled the Ambassador's previously scheduled meeting with the President (later rescheduled for February 27). The Foreign Minister (FoMin) noted the excitement Sierra Leoneans attached to the inauguration of President Obama, adding that her own son had traveled to D.C. to witness the event in person.

¶2. (C) The FoMin complained about donor nations using NGOs to implement foreign assistance programs, noting that funds should be used to improve the capacity of, and resources available to, GoSL officials, who could then better monitor and control NGO activities. She encouraged the United States to give direct budget support to the GoSL and work at training and equipping ministry officials, although she understood that such support was unlikely to be forthcoming. The Ambassador countered that major NGO's made significant contributions in many countries and most worked to support a nation's basic development needs. The FoMin characterized corruption as "ingrained" in Sierra Leone, and had earlier complained that her boss, President Koroma, was "stubborn." Up to this point, he had refused to take necessary action against corrupt or incompetent officials within his administration, although he has supported the strong anti-corruption commission and new law.

¶3. (C) Bangura's harsh comments on the President were odd for any senior official, particularly one who was at the start of the regime one of President Koroma's favorites. Her current bitterness, frequent attacks on her by the media for ineffectiveness, and her prolonged and poorly explained absences, hint that her position in the administration may be precarious (Note: Reftel identified Bangura's apparent fatigue and disenchantment with her position. End Note). Significantly, she did not accompany President Koroma to the AU summit earlier in the year. The media charges may not be baseless; it appears even her Deputy Foreign Minister could not get reliable information on when Bangura was going to return from her latest trip and had to schedule himself for the Presidential meeting with the U.S. Ambassador. Her response to media attacks have also been clumsy and unconvincing, particularly an interview she engineered with one paper with questions of the "you are wonderful at your job; what's your secret?" variety. President Koroma's cabinet reshuffle has been expected for months; while Bangura is not the worst performer, and has been the "star" in Koroma's constellation until the past month. she clearly is now off her game; an inauspicious time as Koroma begins to consider who will be sitting in what chair for the next year of his administration.

PERRY